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Frame-governance of dialogue and de-radicalisation

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# ISLAM AND MUSLIMS AS ELEPHANTS IN THE INTERFAITH ROOM: *Frame governance of dialogue and de-radicalisation*

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## Abstract



Bringing together theories of media and policy frames of Norwegian Muslims as governance instruments, this article performs a microanalysis of the Norwegian 2015 de-radicalisation seminar *Together against Radicalisation and Extremism* as an instance of governance of religious diversity. The seminar was organised by an interfaith forum based in the conservatively Christian 'Bible Belt' of southern Norway and directed at local high school students who attended the seminar as part of their compulsory curricula. Analysing how Islam came to constitute a focal point to which the public presenters frequently related, this study explores how media and policy frames impact cultural encounters at the civic society level and points to how the seminar's subtle workings reproduce significant religious, ethnic and cultural demarcations that stand in opposition to the seminar's minority-inclusive objectives.

## Keywords

Framing Muslims • Norway • de-radicalisation • interreligious dialogue • governance of diversity

## Introduction

Concerns about the intersection of religious extremism and politics have been focal points in the West since Osama bin Laden called for holy war against Western democracies in 1996. Following the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, state-subsidised interfaith dialogue associations, often sponsored as part of political peace efforts, have since emerged internationally. Whereas 11 September 2001 constituted the defining event of the early war on terror, its later phase has been shaped around acts of violence in Europe, as evidenced through the focus on what is often labelled 'home grown terrorism' (Kundnani 2014: 8–9, 65). To prevent the number of assumed threats from increasing, Norwegian governments have issued action plans against the so-called radicalisation and violent extremism.

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Notably, while the preventive measures against violent extremism single-handedly have been seen as a security service task, the latest Norwegian action plan from 2014 posits civil society actors such as faith communities and interfaith dialogue platforms as central partakers within various de-radicalisation efforts (Winswold, Mjelde & Loga 2017: 7).

In contemporary Norway, de-radicalisation efforts constitute a variety of political measures that embrace interfaith organisations. Yet, few studies focus on how civil society communities navigate these, ultimately, political measures or the central media and policy presumptions crosscutting civil society initiatives. Additionally, no studies deal with the Norwegian merging of public authorities with civil society associations in the growing de-radicalisation industry.<sup>1</sup> The present article seeks to address this gap by exploring a de-radicalisation seminar held in the auspices of a local branch of a nationwide and nationally recognised interfaith organisation, Forum for Religious and Life Stances in Kristiansand (Forum for Tro og Livssyn [FTL]). Doing so, the concept of governance of diversity is important. By governance of diversity, I refer to the social practices of addressing, supporting and framing ethno-religious minorities in certain ways. Dominant frames are remediated in a variety of social settings (for Scandinavian case studies on this topic, see Lundby 2018) and shape the ways in which diversity is managed in public events and in everyday social interactions. A fundamental theoretical premise is that frames direct our perception, thought and action during social and media events (Goffman 1974: 10–11) for which reason control and distribution of frames is a prime concern in the operation and analysis of governance of diversity. As framing inhabits power exertions (Entman 1993: 52), framing processes inadvertently bring about embedded forms of governance that can be analytically procured.

New approaches to governance direct attention to various modes of regulation that span a continuum from public authority to societal and individual self-governance. Focussing on the governance of minority religion and the conduct of cultural citizenship, the present article critically engages with how media and policy influence interreligious dialogue. More precisely, the article explores how FTL, a civil society association, organises a de-radicalisation event, how Islam and Muslims are portrayed during this event and how media and policy frames shape the event. The article asks: what part do media and policy frames play in the set-up of this de-radicalisation measure and which mechanisms of inclusion versus exclusion does the merging of interfaith dialogue and de-radicalisation measures promote? By exploring this question, the article provides a micro-scale analysis of an instance of religious diversity management in contemporary Norway. Such governance perspective in combination with framing theory has hitherto not been widely used in studies of regulation of religious diversity (Maussen & Bader 2011: 15).

Methodologically, the study is based on participant observation during the first half of the two-day de-radicalisation seminar held in September 2015 and on interviews with 26 individuals active in various interreligious forums in Norway. A total of 12 interviews were conducted with FTL members including one with the FTL chairman. During 2015 and 2016, I attended the monthly FTL public interfaith meetings and was invited by the FTL chairman

to attend the de-radicalisation seminar in question. Furthermore, policy documents, organisational documents and media representations are part of the analysis.

## Interreligious dialogue in Norway

In Norway, organised interfaith work began in the 1980s and ever since the efforts have become more widespread and institutionalised. Even though these efforts receive public funding today, organised interfaith initiatives have from their inception been concerned with special-interest politics centred on equality between minority religions and life stance communities versus the now secular state and the majority church, the Lutheran Church of Norway (Brottveit, Gresaker & Hoel 2015: 7ff.). Today, the Council for Religious and Life Stance Communities (Samarbeidsrådet for tros- og livsynsamfunn [STL]) constitutes the most central and unifying interfaith community nationally with eight local offshoots across the country plus a youth network. The efforts of STL are wide ranging, and they include policy work and dialogue initiatives.

In 2007, the STL offshoot, FTL, was established in Kristiansand in the Vest-Agder region in south of Norway. FTL comprises 12 local member organisations and receives financial support from the municipality, county and state and by STL through annual ad hoc-funding applications for up-to-date initiatives such as counter-radicalisation initiatives.<sup>2</sup> According to STL, its objectives are:

- to promote mutual understanding and respect between different religious and life stance communities through dialogue;
- to work towards equality between various religious and life stance communities in Norway based on the United Nations Covenants on Human Rights and European Convention on Human Rights and
- to work, internally and externally, with social and ethical issues from the perspective of religions and life stances (Trooglivssyn.no 2017).<sup>3</sup>

Moreover the FTL and STL objectives are to enhance mutual understanding and respect between people, to contribute to a sense of safety and tolerance between faith and life stance organisations and to create awareness of ethical issues from faith and life stance perspectives (Trooglivssyn.no 2017).

The seminar *Together against Radicalisation and Extremism* organised and convened by FTL can roughly be categorised as a so-called political approach to interfaith dialogue (cf. Neufeldt 2011). One purpose of such a political approach is to produce social coexistence or harmony. This typically involves educating the other, and interactions often centre on social or political problems (Neufeldt 2011: 354) such as de-radicalisation. As was the case with the de-radicalisation seminar in question, religious actors convene in a high-profile manner to broadcast positive messages that emerge from the interaction, to address political concerns, etc. This approach simultaneously anticipates that religious leaders will delegitimise actors

who suggest that use of violence is an appropriate means to an end (cf. Neufeldt 2011), which as illustrated in the following also happened to be the case also happened to be the case for this seminar.

Speakers engaged in politically oriented dialogues are usually religious leaders as they are deemed credible and trusted and represent their communities in public forums.<sup>4</sup> The format of exchange is a purposive ‘double monologue’ (Biljefeld 1996), that is semi-staged, sequenced and parallel addresses or conversations absent of any direct exchange of opinion with intensions of giving space in the public sphere to religious figures to state their beliefs to a wider audience and thereby to create knowledge about the respective faith and life stance communities. All addresses and conversation are held in a peaceful and patient tone of voice (Neufeldt 2011: 355), and as I argue elsewhere, in the case of FTL, its public meetings work to rehearse, perform and thus establish an acceptable form of multicultural religiosity (Liebmann 2017: 317–19). Regular attendants at the monthly FTL meetings are primarily middle aged or elderly, white citizens from middle to upper-middle class backgrounds, but, as seen in the following, the audience at this event was significantly younger and did not attend of their own accord but as part of their curricula.

Whereas the last decade has been characterised by increased focus on de-radicalisation measures, in 2014, the government afforded faith communities and interfaith associations an important part in the prevention of religious radicalisation and extremism (Winswold, Mjelde & Loga 2017).<sup>5</sup> Since 2014, the Ministry of Culture has announced annual funding opportunities, ranging from 50,000 to 400,000 NKR, for interfaith events set to create mutual acceptance and respect between faith and life stance associations, promote the associations’ common values, explicated as democracy, rule of law and human rights, and prevent radicalisation (Kulturdepartementet 2014). These funding opportunities are consistent with the government’s *Action Plan against Radicalization and Violent Extremism* (NMJPS 2014). The plan identifies two major extremist groups in Norway, both in strong opposition to one another: al-Qaida-inspired extremism and anti-Islamic right-wing extremism.

Precisely the absorption of interfaith associations into de-radicalisation measures indicates the extent to which interfaith platforms are taking a leading role as policy partners in the governance of religious diversity in many contemporary European countries (Haynes 2013: 8).

## ‘Together against Radicalisation and Extremism’

Listing which initiatives the government – and the ministry – plan to implement, the action plan, issued by the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security, explicitly focuses on youth dialogue conferences and targets a strengthening of faith and life stance dialogues as efforts to counter ‘radicalisation’ through Measures 5 and 15. The dialogues are meant to create knowledge and competence (Measure 5) and to prevent the growth of extreme environments and contribute to reintegration (Measure 15) (NMJPS 2014: 3). Through

Measures 5 and 15, the FTL-initiated seminar *Together against Radicalisation and Extremism* is an integral part of what Winswold, Mjelde & Loga (2017: 15) term ‘primary prevention strategies’. Being, in essence, counter-terrorism measures, primary prevention strategies share a broad preventive scope. As an alternative to singling out certain communities or citizens as particularly ‘suspect’ (Winswold, Mjelde & Loga 2017: 19ff.), the purpose of these efforts is to make the entire citizenry resilient against what is taken to be damaging and thus ‘extreme’ ideas that cause, or condone, violence against Western civilians (*ibid.*:15). Such primary prevention interventions seek to reduce citizens’ risks of becoming ‘radicalised’ by altering their conduct or reducing their exposure to factors linked to violent acts deemed radical. Corresponding to this line of thought, Amir-Moazami (2011: 98–99) has suggested that a central motive for public funding of interfaith associations is essentially based on the mode of governance it constitutes. The organisations help create platforms from which public parties can conduct and steer minorities, especially Muslims, into moderate and liberal citizens of the modern nation state.

As the following section demonstrates, the merging of de-radicalisation and interfaith initiatives produces a certain form of inclusive religiosity, yet sustains and reinforces formations of severe power inequalities between ethno-religious minorities and majorities.

## Islam as organising principle of radicalisation interventions

The pre-circulated official seminar programme of *Together against Radicalisation and Extremism* explicitly stated that the scope of the seminar would use the speakers’ respective religious affiliations (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) as starting points, address the cause(s) of radicalisation and extremism and the consequences of these two issues and discuss how society can confront – and above all – prevent such development.

With the following words, the convened FTL representative opened the de-radicalisation seminar at the town cinema in late 2015 to introduce the programme and the invited speakers:

What we do today does matter because the Norwegian society has changed. The diversity in our culture is reflected in our faith and life stances. It affects the entire development today. What we must talk about is dialogue. Of meeting each other, of conversing, of sharing our thoughts. That’s how we want to contribute to mutual understanding between people.

Three different presentations were given by speakers who represented Christianity, Islam and Judaism, respectively, intermediated by musical features, conversations and a question and answer session that engaged the audience. Every year, the audience consists of local high school students between 15 and 19 years of age, attending the seminar as part of their curricula. Opening the two-and-a-half-hour long seminar, the convenor told the attendees that FTL had asked ‘someone’ to make a short video about what local Kristiansand youth think of when they hear terms such as ‘radicalisation’ and ‘extremism’. The five-minute

long video featured youth of both sexes and different ethnicities who expressed notions of violent attacks, relating them to Muslims: 'Radicalisation is, like, IS and war and violence', a white teenage boy declared, while another said: 'radicalisation is a process, which you go through and which is about terror, flights, and [becoming an] extremist, I think'. A young female put it this way: 'Then I think about ... extreme Muslims'. Afterwards, and without any further elaboration of the youths' remarks, the first presenter entered the stage to deliver her address. Vigdis,<sup>6</sup> an experienced, high-ranking woman in the Lutheran Church of Norway who seemed at ease before the audience, began by reflecting on what it means to be a religious extremist. Vigdis accentuated that nothing is wrong with being strongly religious and that people can be 'extremely religious' without being violent and hurting other people. As was the case with most of the seminar, her presentation nonetheless soon centred on Islam. Speaking against literal readings of Christianity and religious texts in general, Vigdis elaborated:

In the Old Testament, we read about how God is able to help the Israelis with killing thousands of enemies. Thus, God sides with the contenders. That is quite problematic and we have many texts on violence in the Bible, which are at least as violent as those you find occasionally in the Quran. We do not talk much about this but there is [in the texts] a germ for using [the] texts – completely outside their contexts – to say that I am right, and God is on my side.

While the scope of this part of Vigdis' presentation was to stress the problem with fundamentalist expounding of religious texts per se, including within Christianity, she quickly turned to mention the Quran as another instance of a religious text that contains violence. Although Vigdis duly attempted not to exaggerate the violence mentioned in the Quran, as opposed to violence referenced in the Bible, the fact that the Quran, and thereby Islam, was, in fact, referred to in this passage is quite telling. Reflecting on the violent history of Christianity and processes of radicalisation, she proceeded:

If we look to those who are recruited to [do] extreme actions and to [do] violence, then it is often about young people who for different reasons have failed, who are lonely, [have] dropped out of school, [are] unemployed, semi-criminals. And then they find an environment or friends in part of the extreme religious environment. As such, they do not become violent because they become Muslims, but because they befriend Muslims who are violent and criminals. Thus, to begin with, it has nothing at all to do with Islam.

Again, Vigdis used instances of so-called Muslim extremism when exemplifying the social reasons behind recruitment to religious extremism and violence: feelings of failure, loneliness, school drop-out, unemployment and criminality. While Vigdis reflected on the general social mechanisms that can make people prone to being attracted to the 'extreme religious environment[s]' and to carry out violent attacks, she nevertheless pointed specifically to Muslims in her efforts to concretise the radicalisation process itself. Thus,

in the advancement from an elaboration on the generic and slide towards the particular, Vigdis draws in Islam. Although she explicitly disassociates Muslims from automatically being connected with terrorist attacks, the very mention – repeatedly – of Muslims in the context of religious extremism nonetheless implies quite the opposite.

Elsewhere, I have suggested calling such routine fusion of Muslims with violence and terrorism for ‘banal securitization of Islam’ (Liebmann 2018: 194). The concept ‘securitization of Islam’ (Cesari 2013) refers to the central rhetorical tropes, partly induced by the media, which portray Muslims as threats to national security in Western societies. Furthermore, as discerned by Kinnvall and Nesbitt-Larking (2011: 275), securitisation is also an everyday phenomenon and ‘banal securitization’ refers to the everyday practices in which issues or people are categorised in stereotypical terms in response to macro-scale events with local implications. Importantly, through these processes, group as well as individual subjectivities become securitised (*ibid.*). Thus, ‘banal securitization of Islam’ refers to the way in which Muslim citizens, in Norway and beyond, are, on a daily basis, rendered as potentially suspicious by being demarcated and stigmatised (Morey & Yaqin 2011). As I shall return to in the following, the media and policy framings play a significant part in these presumptions crosscutting the seminar.

Following Vigdis’s presentation was the Islamic representative, Farwa, from the Islamic Council of Norway (Islamisk Råd Norge [IRN]), a Muslim umbrella organisation. An equally stage- and media-savvy male Farwa began his talk by briefly introducing IRN and then progressed to his PowerPoint presentation, a tool kit that he used as a point of reference for his ensuing talk. The PowerPoint presentation featured mainly pictures of famous and infamous people such as Osama bin Laden and people identified as members of Profetens Ummah, a salafi-jihadi organisation based in Norway, primarily known through media. The presentation also contained visuals of contemporary and historical sites of terrorist attacks such as the Twin Towers of New York. Departing from his own childhood in Oslo in the 1980s, Farwa continued on to the events of 11 September 2001. Meticulously, and to much amusement from the audience, Farwa (re)told the story about how he, during a work-related stay abroad in July 2011, through his cousin came to know about the bombings in Oslo. On 22 July 2011, far-right, white and then self-proclaimed Christian Anders Breivik bombed the government buildings in central Oslo and attacked a Worker’s Youth League camp on the island of Utøya killing 77 civilians in total. Farwa detailed how his cousin, who worked in the government buildings, had him contacting the Norwegian Police Security Service before they officially were aware of the events, thus hinting at how he suddenly found himself looking suspicious, as he was calling them with what would seem retrieved intelligence still unfamiliar to authorities. This part clearly evoked laughter from the audience members. Elaborating on the rather awkward situation – and intermittently joking about having four children and three wives – Farwa was met by loud outbursts of laughter.

Addressing Profetens Ummah, Farwa then proceeded to show a picture of Islamic clad Imams playing beach volleyball with Norwegian police. Farwa then proceeded with mentioning a group of Imams who were involved with IRN to ‘learn to cooperate’. He continued to address ‘extremists’ involved with IRN and stressed that, during the preceding



five years and onwards, 'their Muslim extremists' were being 'met directly' by IRN, 'with respect and through dialogue'. Interestingly, Farwa did not mark out any theological standpoints during his presentation, besides distancing IRN from religiously justified violence, and mainly reflected on discrimination against Muslims, exemplified through a Norwegian born and raised, well-educated Muslim unable to find work.

Farwa's sequence was the only part in which a speaker triggered direct and immediate response from the audience. The young audience members from different high schools in the Kristiansand area were confined to speak in a limited series of short question and answer sessions and simply raised questions and concerns that seemed prepared in advance. This way, their outbursts of laughter constituted a noticeable break from the otherwise serious content matter, and the laughter was a welcomed reaction to Farwa's diversions. As I shall return to later, Farwa's demeanour and applied tool of humour are embedded in the context of the post-cartoon crisis, which erupted in Denmark in 2005, after which an increasing curiosity about Muslims and their (supposed lack of) humour has created a demand for Muslim self-irony (Bilici 2010: 196).

The Jewish representative Anna was the next presenter. Anna was not affiliated with any religious organisation. She was invited to represent this world religion due to her Jewish descent and because she had recently premiered a documentary on a hitherto untold story about a Jewish foster home prior to World War II. Because Anna was booked for the seminar at the last minute, her session began with a conversation between her and the convenor and a short preview of her film.<sup>7</sup> Opening the session with Anna, the convenor enquired about the documentary's premiere date and proceeded:

Yes, that is fascinating [referring to the documentary]. Those things happened a long time ago, at least before I was born. Do you see – as we are talking about Islamisation and radicalisation and extremism – does tabooing of Jews happen today in Norway as well?

Although Islam and the acts of Muslims did indeed play a significant part in the seminar, up until this point no one had yet spoken of 'Islamisation': the process of a societal shift towards Islam. The abrupt insertion of the term 'Islamisation' reveals the improvised nature of (part of) the seminar content and illustrates the ad hoc planning in terms of invited presenters and evoked subthemes. The sudden introduction of the term is therefore probably a slipup on part of the convenor who is obviously not well versed in the terminology pertaining to mediated conflicts of religion (Abdel-Fadil & Liebmann 2018). Yet, such ad hoc elements also indicate which terms and tropes circulate in the society in relation to a given issue. Precisely the term 'Islamisation' constitutes a central trope in far-right circles across Europe. In the Christian conservatively Vest-Agder region where the seminar took place, Islamophobia has long been known to proliferate (Bangstad 2016). For example, some of the country's most well-known anti-Muslim advocates are based there such as Vidar Kleppe who co-founded the political party The Democrats (Demokraterne) and Arne Tumyr, the former leader of the organisation Stop The Islamisation of Norway (Stopp Islamiseringen av Norge [SIAN]).<sup>8</sup> As demonstrated through its name, SIAN opposes so-called 'Islamisation'

and what the organisation argues are Muslims' attempts to introduce sharia in Norway (*ibid.*: 155–156).

At this point, the convenor turned the conversation towards the recent and violent events in the European cities, Paris and Copenhagen, referencing how 'the whole of Europe went around saying: "Je suis Charlie"'.<sup>9</sup> This part clearly marked a prepared point that served as an entry point for Anna to convey the jewellery she had (co)produced, partly, as a reaction to the attacks in Paris – jewellery worn to symbolise cross-religious coexistence. After disclosing how the idea of the jewellery emerged and responding to several follow-up questions, the convenor directly requested Anna to pose a question to each of the other two presenters. Anna, then, enquired whether Vigdis and Farwa would be willing to wear her jewellery. Visibly glad and seeming relieved to hear both of them answer 'yes', she elaborated:

And I will make no secret of the fact that, to me, the biggest dream is that all young Muslims will wear it. And perhaps even more: young male Muslims. And even more those young Muslims who for many understandable reasons feel marginalised and therefore are likely to become extreme.

Although the seminar's headline and subject matter was that of religious extremism and radicalisation per se, represented by, and through, three different representatives of the major world religions, the content was repeatedly modified towards Islam. The perpetual reference to the Salafi jihadist militant group IS (Islamic State), acts of Muslims, the Quran, recent attacks in Europe by declared Muslims, Muslims as the major beneficiaries of cross-religious coexistence and even the explicit mentioning of 'Islamisation' as an existing topic within the seminar's programme content all thematise Islam. This way, Islam and Muslims came to constitute a focal point around which the entire event revolved. The convenor, the presenters and even the anonymous person behind the introductory video, and the young people in it, shared this line of view. As I shall get back to in the following, such – even unwilling – attention to a certain phenomenon is termed framing.

## Media's depictions of Muslims in and outside Norway

Unquestionably, mass media have become the primary source of information and communication for the majority of modern societies. Likewise, regarding religion, mass and social media constitute the prime supplier of information and communication for Scandinavian citizens (Hjarvard & Lövheim 2012; Lövheim *et al.* 2018). The relation between the media vis-à-vis culture, social life and politics is important as media brings about dual functions, reflecting and shaping issues occurring within these three domains (Eskjær, Hjarvard & Mortensen 2015; Hepp, Hjarvard & Lundby 2015). Departing from frame theory as developed by Erving Goffman (1974), Robert Entman (1993: 52) characterised framing as a way to describe how communicative 'texts' exercise power. Framing involves processes of selection and salience by different agents to promote problem definitions, causal

interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation for the phenomenon described (*ibid.*: 52). The selection and deployment of frames in the coverage of a given issue structures and influences how readers and audiences come to think of the issues in question. That is, frames are essential not only to formations of identity but also to how people interact with each other as social interaction tends to occur around prescribed and prestructured formations. Consequently, the ways in which Muslims' conduct are mediated to a wide audience can be taken to influence the social interaction around these issues as shown in several studies on Islam in Norway (Alghamdi 2015; Bangstad 2011; Døving 2012; Es 2017).

When it comes to religion featured in mass media, debate material on Islam such as opinion pieces has replaced the everyday mentioning of Christianity and the latter's roles and values within the society (Michelsen 2016: 7). The same pattern may appear in social media (Herbert 2018). Correspondingly, a recent cross-national comparative survey (cf. Lövhelm *et al.* 2018) shows that in 2015, 47 percent of the Norwegian respondents perceived Islam as a threat to 'Norwegian culture', whereas, for instance, only 12 percent thought of Judaism and 8 percent of Christianity in such terms (Lundby 2017: 8). The survey supports the notion that Islam is overrepresented in the media compared to the relatively low number of Muslims living in Norway (Lövhelm *et al.* 2018) – estimates suggest around 4 percent of residents identify as Muslims. More importantly, the findings indicate a widespread tendency of associating Islam with tensions and illustrate how mediated far-right discourses on what is perceived to be essential cultural differences have influenced the population (cf. Fangen & Kolås 2016: 421; Mårtensson 2014: 238).

## When frames govern: Islam and Muslims as elephants in the interfaith room

As pointed out earlier, Islam and Muslims constitute a focal point to which the convenor and the presenters relate. Similarly, and in several ways, the high school students in the introductory video instinctively associated the terms 'radicalisation' and 'religious extremism' with Islam as they mentioned 'IS' and 'radical Muslims'. Statements which – considering the more religiously inclusive programme scope – the convenor failed to address. Even when one presenter, Vigdis, explicitly elaborated on 'extremists' tendencies within Christianity, talked elaborately on social mechanisms of exclusion and marginalisation leading to radicalisation and explicitly spoke against prejudices against Muslims in an attempt to avoid reproducing stereotypes, she nonetheless referred to Islam at key moments in her talk. Moreover, Vigdis mentioned the Quran when speaking about religious texts that call for violence, and to concretise the radicalisation process itself, she exemplified Muslims as people from 'extreme religious environments'.

As it seemed necessary for Vigdis to evoke Muslims as embodiments of Norwegian citizens who turn to violent environments to belong, it might be because, to a wide Norwegian audience, the induced images of Muslims as radicals constitute the very essence

of religious extremism and thus work as a didactic framework activated through sheer reference. As mentioned, images of Muslims as religious radicals constitute a well-known frame in Norwegian media and policy discourses (Bangstad 2011; Fangen & Kolås 2016; Vestel 2016). Moreover, in the public sphere, the term 'radicalisation' is ubiquitous and is, invariably, deployed in contexts of security, integration and foreign policy (Sedgwick 2010: 484–87). Precisely, Vigdis' struggle to explicate the term 'radicalisation' may be attributed to its ubiquitous nature. Furthermore, the convenor's rephrasing of the topic of the seminar as being about 'Islamisation' pertains to the particular political–religious context in which the ubiquity of the term 'radicalisation' and the 'mainstreaming of Islamophobia' (Bangstad 2016: 150) in political and media discourses merge.

As noted, Farwa did not mark out any notable theological standpoints during his presentation. Although a prominent member of IRN, he refrained from expounding any religious texts and discussing the content of the represented religion to any noticeable degree. Through recounts about his childhood memories of curious incidents with the Norwegian society and IRN's work with Muslim extremists, etc., all held in a humorous tone of voice, Farwa deployed humour as a form of 'code-switching' (Bilici 2010: 207), thereby projecting an image of himself to the attendants as, above all, a clearly harmless and likeable Muslim. Not coming off as too religious, indicating disinterest in Islamic theology, and being unmistakably relatable – peaceful, friendly and funny – Farwa thus came to personify the antidote to the Muslim stereotype. Media prototypes of Muslim men often see them as humour deprived and overly conservative and thereby constituting embodied threats to what is held to be particularly 'Norwegian values' (cf. Bangstad 2011) such as tolerance, kindness, honesty and democratic attitudes.

Through his performance, Farwa not only managed to mask what seemed as lack of preparation for the event in question, he equally succeeded in playing on the intricate relationship between Islamophobia and Muslim stereotypes through which he, fleetingly, re-humanised Muslims and invited the predominantly ethnically Norwegian audience to take part in a – apparently laughable – symbolic reversal of the social order (Bilici 2010: 207). As such, Farwa's use of humour works as a tool for undoing otherness when he, as *the* Muslim representative on the interfaith scene, faces the delicate task of dealing with the policy and media-induced topic of 'radicalisation'. Addressing this issue is particularly tricky in the setting of a purportedly dialogic interfaith conversation with other non-Muslim presenters in front of a predominantly non-Muslim audience not least given the repeated crisis between institutionalised interfaith associations and Norwegian Muslim organisations (Bangstad 2016: 438ff.).<sup>10</sup>

Put differently, in the paradoxical setting of the secular-staged interreligious event in a conservatively Christian region with a substantial right-wing history, humour works as a form of 'comic relief' (Abdel-Fadil 2005: 6). The term 'comic relief' points to how humour can alleviate social tensions and, thus, is applicable as a defence mechanism when coming to terms with an overwhelming reality (*ibid.*). The cost of Farwa's move is, however, that he comes to sidestep the opportunity to address the unfortunate slip-ups that occur and to engage in any significant interchange with the other presenters. Ultimately, Farwa neither

challenges nor nuances the presumptions underlying the seminar, such as Muslims being particularly prone to violence.

Since media and politics are highly interrelated (Meyen, Thieroff & Strenger 2014), media inadvertently influences funding opportunities and interreligious solution models and, thereby, how certain social problems are framed (Liebmann 2018). One could argue that precisely due to the ‘banal securitization of Islam’, Muslim leaders have aligned themselves with the government and its various de-radicalisation initiatives, as taking an explicit opposition to extremism has become the only legitimate discourse (Kundnani 2014: 14). Internationally, a recent strand of responses to assumed threats from ‘home grown terrorists’ has been to promote recognition of mainstream Islam as the valid identity within an official discourse of tolerance (*ibid.*: 65ff.). Now, the governance in, and of, media frames is particularly evident within the present seminar as a report on municipalities’ roles in counter-radicalisation measures shows how threat assessments of Kristiansand actually differ significantly from the threat assessments of other Norwegian municipalities investigated (cf. Lid *et al.* 2016). Notably, whereas Kristiansand for years has dealt with tangible security threats from the region’s considerable right-wing milieus, ‘Islamic extremism’ is of much less impact precisely in this part of the country (*ibid.*: 53). Ultimately, the inherent focus of the seminar does not mirror the concrete threat assessments of the region but, instead, conveys how radicalisation as a concept has come to connote Islam.

As the presenters, the convenor and the youth in the video disclose, Islam and Muslims constitute a point of reference that cannot be circumvented when reflecting on radicalisation as a phenomenon. One reason for using the term ‘radicalisation’ in public policy measures may actually be to avoid polarisation between Muslim and majority communities (Sedgwick 2010: 493 in endnotes). In theory, the term ‘radicalisation’ facilitates public discussion of the problem of violent Islamism without using the words ‘Islam’ or ‘Muslim’ (*ibid.*), including generic forms of terrorism. Yet, the term – and its connotations – may actually come to establish the very idea that ‘Muslim’ and ‘radical’ are indeed synonymous. Corresponding to the point of George Lakoff (2014) that frames are in force whether one accepts or rejects them, Islam constitutes ‘the elephant’ in the interfaith room because even when presenters actively try to steer away from showcasing prejudices and deploying stereotypes on Muslims, they cannot escape them. On the contrary, they point to Muslims or events and objects that refer to Islam to conceptualise and concretise the essence of religious radicalisation.

## One man’s dialogue, another man’s de-radicalisation

Through media and policy framings of radicalisation as inherently linked to Islam, the initially dialogic event unintendedly becomes intermingled with the trope ‘banal securitization of Islam’. As organised cultural encounters, interreligious events are based on the implicit assumption of an incompatibility that threatens the intended peaceful interaction between the dialogue partners if disagreements are not reduced (Malik 2013: 500), and thus, the existing religious, ethnic and cultural differences must be circumvented. In this

sense, the very set-up of interreligious dialogues is prescribed to facilitate transformation, which inevitably involves governing dynamics. Whereas Muslims in this de-radicalisation seminar constitute the objects of tolerance, as Muslims are the ones being deliberated, the primarily non-Muslim audience is posited at the receiving end of the framing apparatus and handled as subjects of tolerance. As the very organisation of the event reproduces a notion of community that identifies Muslims as a social group to be governed, its inherent framings define and reinforce alleged problem factors that set Muslims apart from constitutional and civic order and therefore legitimise discourses and practices of guidance and tolerance as well as suspicion and control (Dornhof 2012: 388).<sup>11</sup> Tolerance emerges as part of a frame that identifies both the capacity of tolerance and the tolerable with the attending high school students, marking Muslim candidates for an intolerable ferocity that, again, consolidates the dominance of the ethno-religious majority (cf. Brown 2008: 6). Clearly, the seminar and its inherent interreligious dialogue do not foot the respective religions on equal terms as the tolerated citizens, the Muslims, indirectly are marked as undesirable, deviant and marginal by virtue of constituting the tolerated party. Put differently, the seminar works as dialogue for the presenters but de-radicalisation for the audience.

Independently from the media framing of Muslims, another frame occurs due to the governing nature of FTL as a civil society association. As a means of addressing diversity, FTL applies dialogue between world religions as a particular visible frame, but media and policy frames become more evident through the ad hoc content of the seminar such as the speakers' comments and the convenor's entries and narrative transitions between speakers. This way, the evoked tropes, the 'banal securitization of Islam' and 'Islamisation', emanating from policy and media discourses illustrate the extent to which these frames shape society.

## Conclusion

Through a micro-scale analysis of the organising of the de-radicalisation seminar *Together against Radicalisation and Extremism* held in 2015 in Kristiansand in Norway, the article has critically explored how the framing of radicalisation as inherently Islamic came to structure the interfaith seminar in a direction opposite to its intentions of stimulating cross-religious understanding and peaceful coexistence. In an event charged with benevolent intentions of reducing prejudices, the organisers, the convener, the experienced public speakers and the video-projected youth were unable to transcend the media and policy frames of Muslims as particularly prone to violence. The inability of these dedicated civil society members to discard inconspicuous perceptions of Muslims as prototypical extremists not only illustrates the governing and constraining dynamics of media and policy framings and how they are applied at the civic society level but also shows how media and policy framings come to structure a cultural encounter such as the one in question in a direction opposite to its intentions.

Combining theories of media and policy framing (Entman 1993; Goffman 1974), the analysis pointed to how the seminar and its speakers posited Islam as an organising principle around which the intended unpacking of violent religious extremism's generic entities came to revolve. Staged in a secular venue and convened in a setting of mutual intra- and interreligious awareness and proficiency, the seminar effectively works as an instrument of religious diversity management. Through such diversity management, boundaries around religion, ethnicity and culture – tacitly understood to collide with the hegemonic Christian-secular Norwegian culture – were effectively demarcated. Via the pursued tolerance, the seminar represents a merging of de-radicalisation and interfaith initiatives, which exemplifies a surging and mediatised European governance of religious diversity.

The merging produces a certain form of benign, inclusive religiosity concurrently with sustaining and reinforcing formations of severe power inequalities between ethno-religious minorities and majorities. The vague definitions inherent in the term 'radicalisation' combined with the ad hoc nature of interreligious – and other civil society – events pave the way for authorities' capacity to 'instrumentalise civil society organisations' (Hayes & Kundnani 2018: 37). Thereby, authorities may turn the interfaith initiatives into measures of integration, security or foreign policy, which risk undermining the relative autonomy of the civil society.

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## Notes

1. The work of Lid *et al.* (2016) constitutes an exception, but the report only focuses on the Norwegian municipalities' role within de-radicalisation interventions.
2. These are the Norwegian Humanist Association, Catholic Church St. Ansgar, the Norwegian Church, Muslim Union in Agder, the Norwegian Sotozen Buddhist Order, the Adventists, the Methodist Church, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Kristiansand Free Church, the Quaker Society, Ahmadiyya Muslim Jamaat and Al-Rahma Islamic Centre.
3. Original in Norwegian.
4. The aspect of expertise is pivotal. In the context of 'government by community' (Amir-Moazami 2011), dialogue initiatives primarily establish the partners involved in the exchanges as experts who mediate between concerns and interests (Dornhof 2012: 388).
5. In 2013, the government requested STL to prioritise interfaith projects that explicitly seek to counter an increase in 'extreme religious attitudes' within the citizenry (Brottveit,

- Gresaker & Hoel 2015: 36). FTL has since then conducted annual de-radicalisation seminars on 'religious extremism' directed at local high school students.
6. All names have been changed for the sake of anonymity.
  7. The number of practicing Jews in Norway is very low, and Anna was invited as a last-minute substitute, although she is not a practicing Jew, which she emphasised several times.
  8. Vidar Kleppe was a member of parliament and deputy leader of the Progress Party until he was suspended and left the party in 2001. In 2002, he (co)founded the Democrats Party – a national conservative political party without parliamentary representation. Since 2003, he has held office in the Vest-Agder county council and the Kristiansand municipal council. SIAN, established in Agder in 2008, has long been among the largest membership organisations of the anti-Muslim far-right.
  9. 'Je suis Charlie' is a slogan and logo created by the French art director Joachim Roncin and adopted by supporters of freedom of speech following the attack in the French satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* on 7 January 2015 killing 12 people. Here, the convenor alludes to both this attack and the attacks in Copenhagen in February of the same year killing two people.
  10. Muslim civil society actors heavily criticized IRN in 2014, claiming that IRN was not determined enough in their dealings with 'radicalised Muslims'. Furthermore, there was a crisis in the long-standing dialogue between IRN and other faith communities in 2013 and 2014, according to Norwegian media reports (Bangstad & Elgvin 2016: 10).
  11. Whereas Sarah Dornhof (2012: 393) has noted how Christianity in Germany has merged into the cultural heritage while Islam remains alien to the secular conception of the national community, this certainly holds true in the south of Norway, which has a substantial Christian tradition (Repstad 2009).

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